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Young food blogger critiques Sugar Institute's school visit

Northern Secondary principal apologizes for not vetting nutrition talk speakers after Grade 9 student Ryan Storm decries an appearance by the sugar group.



STEVE RUSSELL / TORONTO STAR

At 14, Grade 9 student Ryan Storm is a huge organic foodie who writes a blog that reviews restaurants, chefs, even grocery stores in Toronto where people can buy whole food. He was shocked when the Canadian Sugar Institute came to his school this week for a presentation about sugar.

By: Louise Brown GTA, Education Schools, Published on Sat Nov 15 2014

Big Sugar, meet your match; a 14-year-old health food blogger from north Toronto.

Young Ryan Storm went into political sugar shock this week when the Canadian Sugar Institute came to his school to talk about sugar as part of a health program, which he called “an oxymoron.” His online rant about how he stood up to their experts — “Don’t you know sugar’s addictive properties have been compared to cocaine?” — have made him, to some, a virtual David-and-Goliath hero.

The Grade 9 student at Northern Secondary School has won high-fives and congratulatory tweets (he has nearly [1,000 Twitter followers](#)) from nutritionists, doctors and foodies — some using the hashtag #toxicsugar — and an apology from the school board for a visit officials say was not properly cleared.

“I don’t know why they need to come to a school; I asked them if they’d seen [Fed Up](#), the documentary that talks about how addictive added sugar can be, but they said there were multiple studies that show that sugar is not addictive at all,” Ryan told the Star. You can listen to him describe the encounter to his family — over a healthy dinner, of course — in a six-minute sound clip posted as part of his indignant report [My Run-in With Sugar](#) on his blog Ry’s Ratings.

“I asked them, ‘Who funded those studies?’”

The non-profit Canadian Sugar Institute is an educational resource group which, while paid for by the sugar industry, “has a completely distinct and separate mandate; we have a scientific advisory council with researchers from across the country who review all our materials,” said president Sandra Marsden, a registered dietitian. Together with the Ontario agriculture sector, the group created lesson plans for teachers about sugar, from its history to the science of the sweetener. This is the first time they have been invited to a school.

“It’s not our mandate to pitch or promote sugar; we’re not a marketing board; our job is to provide an information service to health professionals, educators and even the media.”

The Sugar Institute dietitians who went to Northern designed a *Jeopardy*-style quiz for students to help bust myths about sugar, she said — from calories to food labels and Canada’s Food Guide — but “absolutely not” to flog its consumption to teens.

The Institute was invited to the school by Northern’s cafeteria staff, who have been spicing up lunch hour this fall with nutritional talks, cooking demos and games as part of a food awareness campaign dubbed The Healthy Hub, said principal Ron Felsen. With two visits from the Holland Marsh Growers’ Association, talks about root vegetables — celery root was “a big hit,” Felsen noted — the invitation to the sugar industry was a misstep.

“It’s a great initiative, but all speakers should be vetted,” said Felsen. “I’m glad we have students that will question things.”

Ryan often questions food processing and additives on his blog, which he says he launched when he was 8 to win more time on the computer. His family has gone organic since a younger sibling was diagnosed with severe allergies, and there is no regular sugar in his home.

“We have lots of sweeteners at home; coconut sugar, maple syrup, honey,” said Ryan, who donated the money from his bar mitzvah to an environmental group called [Shoresh](#) that helps save bees.

The family doesn’t eat meat at home. They shop at weekly markets. Fresh vegetables are delivered each week from a farm. Ryan’s lunch Thursday was leftovers: a veggie burger, kale chips and roasted chickpeas.

“I don’t think kids should be marketed to, especially about toxic food,” said his mother, Lisa Borden. “And if kids question things, they should be applauded.”